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*The Lost Art of Letter
Writing*

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First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2017.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2100-9

Typeset in 10.5/15.5 pt Adobe Garamond Pro by Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

For Ash,

*With love for giving me goosebumps with her talk of stationery shops
and with thanks for all those beautiful letters*

✿

For Clara,

*With thanks for being the namesake
and with love for always knowing when I need cake*

Chapter One

The shop is tucked down a little side street, missed by most people, except those few seeking it out or accidentally stumbling upon it on their way to somewhere else entirely. The shop has a little green door, requiring customers to stoop upon entering, and tiny windows so cluttered that it's impossible to peer through and see what's going on inside. Which is exactly how Clara wants it to be. She doesn't desire great wealth or prestige; she doesn't dream of attracting crowds of students and tourists passing through Cambridge, as other shop owners do. No, Clara wants those who have wandered away from the crowds, those who are feeling distracted and disconnected, those with bruised hearts, those who don't know how to undo the past and soothe their pain, those who doubt it's even possible.

Until, that is, they wander along the tiny street and come upon the tiny shop. In one of its tiny windows is tucked a tiny note, written in tiny, but elegant, handwriting, inviting them to venture inside and:

Learn the lost art of letter writing . . .

Most can't remember when they last sat down to press the nib of a pen to paper, when they last inscribed an envelope, found a stamp and dropped a letter into a postbox, imagining the person who'd open it, grateful for the gift of thought and time sent from afar. And yet, even if they've never written so much as a postcard before, still they'll step inside – seized by a sudden, silent urge they can't understand – and gasp.

The walls of the little shop are lined with letters, hundreds and hundreds of letters, in every colour of ink and paper and every style of handwriting. Dark oak cabinets contain writing papers in a thousand different designs: papers lined with silver leaf, embedded with roses and violets, papers studded with glittering foil stars, or painted with watercolour sunflowers – each unique and furnished with matching envelopes. Shelves sit above the cabinets, weighed down with a rainbow of notebooks: bound in leather, swathed in silk, embroidered on linen or cotton, some made of paper stitched with flower petals but none the same as any other.

Only one corner of the little stationery shop is clear of any papers, pens or other writing paraphernalia. In this corner stands a delicate ornate Victorian writing desk made of mahogany and inlaid with mother-of-pearl, containing a dozen drawers – one of them curiously locked and impossible to open – and accompanied by a chair cushioned with dark-green velvet.

It is here that Clara's particular magic takes place.

Upon the lettered walls hang half a dozen glass cabinets lined in crimson velvet, each just large enough to contain a single pen. Clara has held each of these pens, except one. Her grandfather made them all, buying them back at great expense years after he'd sold them. One was used by John Lennon to compose *Imagine*,

another by Daphne du Maurier to write *Rebecca*, another by Quentin Blake to illustrate *Matilda* . . .

The only pen Clara hasn't touched is the one her grandfather made especially for her. The nib is gold, the inlay platinum, the barrel plated in silver, the cap topped with a small, single pink diamond. It was a gift on her thirteenth birthday and, with it, Clara's grandfather attached a promise that one day – when she was ready – she'd use it to write her own great novel. He'd seen it in her spirit, he whispered, the day she was born he had seen that literature was her destiny.

So far, however, Clara has never been able to write anything longer than a letter. She's planned plenty of books and begun (with the assistance of lesser pens) a great many of them. She's written millions of words, constructed thousands of sentences, even completed a paragraph or two, but hasn't yet managed to finish a first chapter. Every day Clara tries in vain to realise her grandfather's prophecy but lately, twenty years after he gave her the pen, she's starting to wonder if he didn't make a mistake.

Clara is sitting behind the counter (carved by the same carpenter who created the writing desk, in dark mahogany and mother-of-pearl and topped with an antique black-and-gold cash register) when her next lost soul walks into the shop. For a moment the woman seems confused, as if she's trying to remember why she's standing in the doorway of a stationery shop at all. Then she glances up and catches Clara's eye.

'Welcome to *Letters*,' Clara says with a smile, grateful for the excuse to put down her unresponsive pen. She stands, walks around the counter, and stops at the cabinet on the other side of the room. Then she turns back to the woman. Clara waits for a moment, then speaks into the silence.

‘So,’ she says gently, ‘to whom are you writing?’

‘I’m sorry?’ The woman seems confused again.

‘Well,’ Clara says, ‘you’ve come here to write a letter . . .’

The woman frowns. ‘I have?’

Clara smiles again. ‘Just give me a moment.’

She glances at the cabinet again, her eyes slowly scanning each unlabelled drawer in turn. Then she stops, bends and opens a drawer close to the floor. Clara picks carefully through the papers, until she selects one and holds it out towards her new customer on her open palm.

‘If I gave you this paper, to write something you needed to say to someone you haven’t yet said it to,’ Clara says, ‘then who might that someone be?’

The woman reaches out to take the paper, holding it as if it were made of gold, which, indeed, it is: a sheet of cream linen flecked with tiny slices of gold leaf.

‘My sister,’ she says, so softly that Clara almost can’t hear. ‘I’d write a letter to my sister.’

Clara’s smile deepens. ‘Perfect.’ Crossing the room, she ducks behind the counter again, pulling open unseen drawers and closing them again. ‘I’ll find you the perfect pen, so you can sit down and write.’

‘Oh, no.’ The young woman shakes her head. ‘I can’t.’

Clara looks up, her fingers curled around a long, thin, silver pen.

‘Why ever not?’

The woman stares at her feet. Her voice, when at last she speaks, is as soft as falling leaves. ‘Because she’s . . . dead.’

Clara nods, as if she’d expected exactly that answer which, indeed, she had.

‘I’m sorry to hear it,’ she says. ‘But I wouldn’t let a little thing

like death stop you. And don't worry, I have a special postbox for letters like that.'

'You do?'

'Oh, yes,' Clara says. 'Of all the letters written in this shop, perhaps half of them are written to people who won't ever read them. At least, not in a way that we might understand.'

'Really?'

'Take this,' Clara holds out the silver pen. 'You don't need to know what to write. The desk will help you with that. Almost as soon as you sit the words will start to come, I promise.'

Tears fill the woman's eyes. She steps forward and takes the pen, tentatively, between her thumb and forefinger. 'Thank you.' She presses the paper to her chest. 'I want—I never had the chance to say . . .'

Clara nods, taking a step back to allow the woman to walk to the writing desk. She has read hundreds, possibly thousands, of letters to ghosts in the last decade of owning the stationery shop. Each letter has touched her heart, and each writer has captured her curiosity. And yet, there is something about this woman that particularly intrigues Clara. She wants to sit and drink cups of tea and listen to her life and learn why her pretty blue eyes seem so very sad. But, of course, she can't.

'Sit,' she says instead, as the woman hovers by the desk. 'Take as long as you want. No one will come into the shop until you are done.'

The woman does so then, placing her paper carefully on the square of green felt, smoothing it over with her palm. 'Thank you,' she whispers, just loud enough to be heard, then curls her body over the desk, takes a deep breath and presses her nose to the paper.

Clara watches as the woman slips slowly into the past, her

breath and memories mingling in concentrated puffs. Later, her breath comes in silent sobs as she wipes tears from her cheeks before they fall onto the paper, while still clutching the immobile pen tight in her fist. Clara watches the woman's shoulders shake. Then a stillness comes over her and she begins again to write. Clara watches the pen race across the page, inky black letters sliding out at such speed that every word surely obscures the next. The air crackles with the burst of energy just released, the nibs of all the other pens twitch excitedly, impatient for their turn. A thousand papers rustle in a hundred drawers and Clara watches, a smile on her lips and a wish in her heart that one day she will be possessed to write like that; only a book instead of a letter. Unfortunately, and frustratingly, the magic of the writing desk doesn't seem to lend itself to anything other than letters.

When the speeding pen is finally still again and the air is silent, Clara pulls her gaze away and pretends to be studying the empty page of the notebook on her lap. She's staring at it when the woman is standing in front of the counter, wiping her blue eyes.

'I didn't . . . I don't,' she mumbles. She takes a deep breath. 'I don't know what to do with . . .' She folds the letter twice in half. 'Will you read it, if I give it to you?'

'Only if you want me to,' Clara says.

'Oh,' the woman says. 'But why would I . . . ?'

'Some people feel that letters aren't really letters until they've been read,' Clara explains. 'Even if it's by someone who isn't the intended recipient.'

The woman considers this. 'Yes, I suppose . . . Well, I'd like to leave it with you. But I'd rather you didn't read it, if that's all right.'

'Of course.' Clara nods, hoping the disappointment doesn't show on her face. 'Then I'll find you an envelope.'

She walks across the carpeted floor to the cabinet of closed drawers, bending down and opening the same one where she'd found the linen paper flecked with gold leaf. When she stands, Clara offers her customer the matching envelope.

'Thank you.' The woman slides her letter inside then licks and seals her secret.

'Would you like to post it?' Clara asks.

'Where?'

Clara points to the small, flat face of a dark-red postbox embedded into the wall behind the counter. 'Just there.'

A slight smile dimples the woman's cheeks. She walks to the box and drops her envelope inside – kissing it quickly before letting it go. She turns back to Clara. 'I can't . . . I . . . Thank you . . . But, how much do I . . . ?'

'That depends,' Clara says. 'Would you like the pen, or only the letter?'

The woman glances down at the pen in her hand, as if she'd forgotten it was there. She looks at the small leather bag hanging at her side.

'I—just the letter, please.'

'Okay. Then that's four pounds and fifty-five pence, please.'

The woman opens her bag, pulls out her purse and thrusts a ten-pound note into Clara's hand, along with the pen.

'I'd give you more, if I could, but' – she grasps Clara's hands tightly – 'thank you, thank you, thank you so much.'

Then she lets go and, without looking Clara in the eye, turns and hurries out. As the green door falls closed behind the unknown customer, Clara walks back to the counter and rings the money into the till, feeling a slight tug of sorrow knowing that she'll never see this particular woman again. Clara feels this way each time

a customer leaves, wishing the connection could last just a little longer but, of course, it can't.

With a soft sigh, Clara slides the silver pen back into its drawer.

Clara wrote her first letter when she was four years old. It contained three sentences and was addressed to her cat. Now she writes nearly every day, letters long and short, addressed to people she doesn't know and will never meet.

Although Clara only lives a few minutes' walk from her shop, she never goes straight home after closing time. Instead, whatever the weather, no matter how wet or cold, she takes long detours through town, sometimes (on long summer nights) venturing along winding country roads and across fields into the surrounding villages. While she walks, Clara glances into the windows of the houses she passes, looking for the recipient of her next letter. Then she'll stop and take a closer look. One day she'll see an exhausted mother rocking a crying child, another she sees an old man gazing sadly at the wall, or a bachelor eating a TV dinner for one. Some days Clara sees no one, but it doesn't matter because there is always the next day and the day after that.

Clara knows when she sees someone she can write to, someone who will open her letter – her anonymous, unasked-for letter – and, instead of tossing it straight in the wastepaper basket, will sit down and spread the paper open on their lap, gazing in wonderment at the words – words that are, somehow, exactly what they need to hear in that moment, words that will heal, motivate, inspire or console, words that have clearly been chosen by someone who can see straight into the darkest nooks and crannies of their souls.

They will sit a while longer then, pressing the paper beneath their fingertips, letting the words soak off the page and into their

hands, until a tiny spark of hope ignites in their chest and they stand, filled with renewed determination and a sense of self-belief and faith they haven't known since childhood. They'll put the letter away in a safe and secret place, returning to it again and again over the coming days, weeks, months and years – whenever they need to remember, to reignite that spark of hope they felt upon first reading it, until they've imbued it so many times that the words have knitted together into the cells of their blood and the marrow of their bones.

When Clara sees such a person she feels it in the tips of her fingers – a tingling sensation akin to a slight electric shock – then she notes down their address in her notebook and continues walking.

Sometimes the letter takes a week to write, sometimes only an hour and Clara has a ritual accompanying the start of each one. First of all, she sits at the counter, remembering the person she saw, the look on their face, the layout of their living room, the wallpaper on their walls . . . Then she slides off her chair and hurries across the dark wooden floorboards to the cabinets containing the writing papers. Usually, Clara instinctively knows the drawer she needs, immediately plucking out the perfect piece of paper, though sometimes she has to search a little longer before finding the right one. Choosing the envelope follows and, finally, the pen. Although she has thousands of papers to choose from, and hundreds of pens, it never takes Clara more than a few minutes to make her selection. Which is a shame really, since she enjoys the moment of anticipation so much.

Once she has her instruments, Clara sits at the little writing desk and, much like her customers, waits for inspiration to strike. Sometimes this takes only moments, sometimes a little longer,

though, no matter how long it takes, Clara doesn't find the waiting a frustrating experience but a meditative one. She enjoys the silence, the tentative sense of connection with a complete stranger, the expectation of hope and healing to come.

And when, at last, she starts to write, Clara doesn't select the words herself, doesn't carefully craft sentences of specially tailored wisdom and inspiration for the intended recipient, since she has no idea what she ought to say and what they need to hear. Instead she allows the magic of the desk to take over. So the pen skims across the paper, leaving a loping trail of purple ink in its wake, and Clara just holds on. She's hardly aware of what she writes and never reads the letters back when they are finished. She simply sits at the desk until the pen stops and she knows she's done.